

Daughters of the Digital Empire

Book One of
Moonlight Hearts

By D.D. Ward

And Margaret Lovelace

Chapter 6: Best Friends

“We saw a pair of beautiful ladies in need of company and thought we should introduce ourselves.”

I turned to see that the suitors had moved to join us.

The Duke Leon Delmar had been speaking. He waited until we had both turned, and then continued, “As long as you’d like the company. You know, that is. We wouldn’t dream of disturbing you. Are we disturbing you? I hope not.”

Fiona gave Leon a flat smile, “Well that undercut all the confidence you presented. How did you do that?”

Leon smiled an off-balance smile, “It’s a gift.”

“So, ladies,” Vincent said, “Are we welcome, or should we move on?”

“You are, of course, most welcome to join us,” Lynn said, “I am Lady Carolynn Octavian. This is my cousin, Lady Karen Octavian. But please. Call us Lynn and Ren.”

Vincent dropped into a practiced bow, “I am Count Vincent Metternich. You may, of course, call me Vincent. This is your own Duke Leon Delmar- but you both know him. And the lovely lady beside me is Countess Fiona Myrddhin. “

Leon dropped into a crisp military bow. Fiona sighed and then curtsied.

“Call me Leon.”

“Call me Fiona.”

Aftershave and perfume mingled. Vanilla and musk, hyacinth and rose water. It was a heady mixture. And it overwhelmed my nasal passages for a moment. I almost put a hand on Vincent’s shoulder to steady myself.

“I noticed that you left me out.” Wulfric said.

“Oh, yes I did. My apologies to your royal highness. That was inexcusable of me. This is his royal highness Prince Wulfric Hardradasson. And this is his personal guard: Sir Ragnar Ulfson.”

“Thank you, Vincent. You got there, eventually.”

I got a better look at Ragnar and his tattoos this time. He was a short man, five foot five inches. But even shifting his weight, he radiated danger. Small or not, thin or not, this man could fight. And then I examined his skull tattoos. They were wolf heads, depicted in a stylized Celtic design. Although I assumed they wouldn't call the design Celtic in nature. Hyperborean?

“It's a pleasure to meet you.” Lynn said, clapping her hands together and beaming. “I would love to hear about you all. I know a little bit, but not enough.”

Wulfric nodded, “I am Prince Wulfric Hardradasson of House Ragnarson. I stand first in line for the throne of Hyperborea. And no woman can resist my charms.”

Fiona coughed and spoke, “We are neighbors of course. Our cities have grown so much that there is no space between them. And we have met at social gatherings many times. So, I am at a loss as to what you may not know. I am sure there are many things, but I apologize, as I am unable to think of anything at the moment. Oh, and I can resist any man's charms.”

Wulfric stiffened, “I am a master swordsman. I have killed five opponents in duels and many more upon the battlefield.”

Leon smiled, “I'm proud to say that I've never been in a duel. And when the Verity hunts pirates and smugglers upon the high seas, I try to take my opponents alive. I find that trial in front of a judge is preferable to frontier justice. Slavers don't get that courtesy. But everyone else does.”

Wulfric shook his head, “To think your duke is so weak minded. A ruler must be a warrior. And a warrior must be willing to cut down those who stand in the way of his goal.”

Vincent tapped his cheekbone with his index finger before speaking. “We've swung onto a dark subject. I'm sure the lady Lynn would prefer something lighter. You must know my family for its reputation as diplomats. People also know my family and

House Metternich as a whole for our wineries. This is the advantage of living in Southern Karshvar. Here it is late autumn. In Agartha it is still the growing season.”

Wulfric grinned and crossed his arms, “We Hyperboreans are a strong people. We live in a land of cold and darkness. The cold forges us. The darkness makes us men. We stand above other nations for this reason.

I tried to avoid looking at Wulfric. I noticed and made eye contact with my aunt Theresa. Theresa looked like an older version of Lynn. She raised her eyebrows and then beckoned me over with her index finger. Intrigued, I sauntered over to my aunt. She wore a sunburst orange fascinator pinned into her hair. This matched her orange gown. The gown had pagoda sleeves and a dramatic bustle that extended behind her. She wore simple gold jewelry with no gems or cameos, and I couldn’t see her shoes at all. Her outfit looked more old fashioned. It almost looked historically accurate, compared to what us younger ladies wore.

“Aunt Theresa? You wanted something?”

“I wanted to chat, dear. You’re looking well. In fact, I’d say you look better than I’ve seen you look in years. You’re radiant this morning. And I know for a fact that you are not a morning person.”

“Thank you, Auntie,” I paused, “You’re looking beautiful as well.”

“Nice of you to lie to me dear. But I know how good all you young ones look. I can’t compare.”

She paused, “And doesn’t the countess look daring? You appreciate fashion dear.”

I nodded, “Yes, the dress looks amazing. I couldn’t get away with that color. I don’t look good in blues.”

“Can you keep a secret dear?” Theresa asked.

I thought about the rival in the game. She gossiped and spread terrible rumors about the heroine. Could the rival keep a secret? Would she keep a secret? No. I could keep a secret, but would Theresa believe that I would keep a secret? I doubted it very much.

“This is me. So, I’d say that’s a tall order. But you know that auntie. So why ask?”

“Let’s say that I have a good feeling this time. I see something new in you dear. Or rather, I see something that I haven’t seen in a very long time.”

“Um, thank you.” My mind raced. What did she mean? Did she know what I was?

“What do you think of his royal highness?” Theresa asked.

“Honestly?” I said. “I think he’s a nastier piece of work than I am.”

Theresa cackled, “Hah!” Then she paused, “He’s worse than that. We’ve all heard the stories about the prince. But I’ve heard more. I’ve heard that even the blood of the royal family is poisonous. I don’t want that man marrying my daughter. You’ve not been close recently. But as children, you were close. I am asking you to reach back, Ren. Remember that closeness, that loyalty. Please, protect her.”

This wasn’t part of the game. Theresa was right, the heroine and the rival hadn’t been close for years. So why was she asking me? What did she think she saw? Either way, it was an easy answer. I was going to protect Lynn. Even before she asked.

“Yes, auntie. I will. You have my word, for as much as it’s worth.”

“I’ll take it. As I said, I see something.”

I wandered back towards Lynn. As I did, I heard Wulfric speaking.

“Well, I’m afraid these other fools have wasted their time. They came here for nothing,” Wulfric said. “I have chosen you as my bride. So, all that remains is the formalities. Go ahead, tell these three that you are already my bride.”

I remembered this part from the game. I hated Wulfric as soon as he said this. And I hated him more when Lynn explained his response. No matter how the player answers, Wulfric gets mad and rescinds his proposal. If you say yes, he mocks you as desperate to join a royal house. If you say no, he becomes offended that a lower born noble would dare refuse him. So, the question was how Lynn would choose to get rejected. Saying yes would drop his respect for her but raise his interest. Saying no would drop his interest but raise his respect. Lynn preferred to say no. She had told me

that gaining a suitor's interest was much easier than gaining a suitor's respect. And you needed both to bag a suitor.

"I must apologize to your royal highness. I could not accept such a proposal without any warning."

Wulfric stepped back as though struck. I knew what was coming, but experiencing it was a lot different than watching on a monitor. I felt my anger rising as Wulfric's face contorted. You moron, I wanted to say. You did this. But I said nothing.

"You bitch, how dare you! I am the crown prince. You are gutter nobility. You should be on your knees thanking me for my generosity!"

I ground my teeth, but said nothing.

"You wasted my time in having me come here. I do not like having my time wasted. And you, it turns out, are a waste of my time."

I kept my mouth shut, and so did Lynn. But as I looked at Lynn, I saw a tear escape and roll down her cheek.

Wulfric was still ranting, insulting Lynn, but I couldn't hear him anymore over the blood rushing in my ears. I stepped between Wulfric and Lynn.

"You are the waste of time, your royal highness. A thug in a nice suit who likes to bully women."

I slapped him across his right cheek.

For a moment, nobody moved. Then Wulfric reached for his court sword. I tensed up. He drew the sword and leveled it at my throat. I froze.

"I should kill you for that." Wulfric growled.

"But you will not do so." Fiona said, stepping behind him. Wulfric shifted, about to turn towards Fiona, then he stopped. I heard a heavy metallic clank. Her sash drifted to the floor and landed on a hollow golden cylinder.

"Another bitch from this grubby little island." Wulfric said.

“Oh yes. But this bitch has teeth,” Fiona said, her voice iron, “So you are going to take a walk, and cool off. Don’t come back today either. Now walk.”

Wulfric hesitated a moment and then sheathed his court sword. He turned and began to walk away, then stopped.

“Don’t think for a moment that I will forget this. Don’t think Hyperborea will forget this. In the end, you can’t stand against me, and Ys can’t stand against Hyperborea. You will regret this error.”

And then he stalked away into the crowd.

Lynn turned and stepped forward stopping inches from my face, “What the hell were you thinking? You’ve endangered everyone on Ys with that move. We can’t stand against Hyperborea, he’s right about that. And you had to go and piss him off!”

“I was thinking that I couldn’t let him say that to you.” I answered.

“Of course, he can say that to me! He’s the crown prince of the strongest nation on the Boro Sea! He can do whatever he wants! We can’t stop him. We mustn’t stop him. We must redirect him. You acted as a barrier, and Hyperborea breaks barriers. He would only have been mad at me! And now he’s mad at you too! And he’s mad at Ys itself! I had this in hand! And now I don’t know what will happen!”

“This isn’t a game!” I said.

“Yes, it is! It’s always been a game! And you went and flipped the board!”

“Agartha does not bow to Hyperborean aggression. I would hope that Ys would take the same view,” Count Vincent said stepping forward.

Lynn clenched her hands into fists, “But this puts all Yssians in danger. Lives are at risk. They aren’t puppets or chips on the board.”

“Well said,” Duke Leon said with a smile and a nod, “Nobility has a duty to the people, not to their own pride.”

I shook my head, “I don’t care about my own pride. I care about the safety of my best friend!”

“Wulfric is scum,” Fiona added. I noticed that she was holding a small roundel dagger with a golden hilt. And I realized her sash clasp concealed the dagger. That was how she had made Wulfric back off. “The slap was brave. And I respect your loyalty.”

“Ys deserves her loyalty as well,” Lynn said, “These are real people at risk now. We don’t get to think of our own interests. We are emissaries of our people, stewards of their safety.”

“Yes,” Leon said, “That slap was a terrible idea. But. But I am glad that somebody stood up for your honor. As Duke, I couldn’t do it without declaring war. If somebody was going to do that, Lady Karen was the best choice. She has no military rank, no martial training of which I am aware. He can’t presume that she is acting on behalf of the kingdom. He can’t say that she is acting on behalf of my duchy or even her uncle’s barony. When she acts, she acts only for herself.”

“But Wulfric may still declare war to satisfy his injured pride!” Lynn said.

“Indeed,” Fiona said, “But then it will be an act of aggression.”

“And Agarthia will not side with Hyperborea in such a situation.” Vincent said.

Lynn flinched, “But that won’t prevent thousands from dying.”

“Indeed,” Fiona nodded. “I cannot say whether the slap was wise, regardless of how satisfying I found that. And I did find it very satisfying.”

Lynn shifted her shoulders, “Please my lords and ladies, would you give me a moment alone with my cousin?”

They nodded, and I cringed. This wouldn’t be good.

“Ren, if you would please?”

I sighed and nodded. She led me away from the group and we stepped behind a pillar.

“What were you thinking?” Lynn said, “You know he rejects the heroine either way at this point. Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t plan to do anything,” I admitted. “But I got so angry actually hearing his insults directed at you in person.”

Lynn smiled, “That is sweet. But you shouldn’t have done it. As long as we stick to the script, we can save all Ys.”

“At the cost of you marrying an abusive monster. You know what he is, what he’s like. He’s a monster. A literal monster.”

“It saves Ys!” She hissed.

“It doesn’t save Ys! It buys time. Nothing more.”

“This is the path that wins the game! No discussion!” Lynn said.

“But what if the game doesn’t end now? Then this won’t end when the credits roll.” I answered, “In fact, credits won’t roll. Things will keep going. You’ll have to deal with that monster if you marry him.”

“That doesn’t matter! This is the only way to save the people of Ys. End of story!”

“No, it isn’t! This isn’t the game anymore. We aren’t limited to the choices that the designers set for us.”

“But if I don’t follow the game path, I can’t guarantee that I’ll succeed!”

“You can’t guarantee you’ll succeed now! There are too many moving parts now. Use your knowledge to find a way to save the people- and yourself! Please.”

“No. I know I can do this. Any other way is a risk I’m not willing to take. I’m not willing to let thousands of people die.”

I felt tears bubbling up, “And I’m not willing to let you sacrifice yourself like this.”

A tear ran down Lynn’s face, “Then I guess you’re in the right body, because if you’re trying to stop me, then we are rivals.”

She turned and marched away. I saw the remaining suitors watching from a distance. Leon's eyes glistened. Vincent had a hand over his mouth. Fiona appeared unmoved.

Amy appeared beside me, "That didn't look like it went well."

I shook my head, unable to speak lest I break into hiccupping sobs.

"Did you need another drink?"

I looked at the drinks tray she carried and ignored the wine in favor of a snifter of brandy. Then, after a moment's consideration, I took a second snifter from the tray.

"Thank you." I gasped between hiccups.

Amy nodded, "Now let's find you a couch before you faint."

